

## The Bad, the Good, the Misunderstood: The Social Effects of Racial Humor

Donald A. Saucier and Conor J. O’Dea  
Kansas State University

Megan L. Strain  
University of Nebraska at Kearney

Racial humor has long been a part of American culture, but its potential for varied interpretation leads to a wide range of possible effects, which have only recently become an area of investigation in psychological research. The literature on racial and disparaging humor, and particularly its conceptualization according to the “sword and shield metaphor” (Rappoport, 2005), points to 3 possibilities that vary in terms of intention and perception and have the potential to affect the outcomes associated with racial humor. When racial humor is antisocial in intention (i.e., used as a sword) and perceived as such, it may reinforce the social hierarchy and stereotypes about the individuals it targets, potentially loosening societal norms that discourage expressions of prejudice. When racial humor is prosocial in intention (i.e., used as a shield) and perceived as such, it may serve to challenge and protect against prejudice and create affiliation between members of groups who may be affected by social inequality. Finally, some prosocially motivated ethnic humor may be misperceived as antisocial, presenting the possibility of unintentionally (and ironically) reinforcing the status quo rather than subverting it. Despite this wide range of potential outcomes, we maintain that humor’s inherently social and ambiguous nature presents a hopeful opportunity for the discussion and possible reduction of prejudice—as long as the humor itself is embedded in a discussion that raises awareness of the issues it addresses. Equally important is the need for those who use such humor to understand its potential to be bad, good, or misunderstood.

**Keywords:** racial humor, disparagement humor, subversive humor, prejudice, discrimination

In a classic *Saturday Night Live* skit, Chevy Chase and Richard Pryor assumed the roles of interviewer and applicant, respectively (Mooney & Brooks, 1975). Chevy Chase, a White man, asked Richard Pryor, a Black man, to engage in a word-association test during which Chase would read a word and Pryor would respond with the first word that he thought of in response. The test started with Chase reading benign words (e.g., *dog*) to which Pryor responded with appropriately be-

nign responses (e.g., *tree*), but the words that Chase read became quickly more provoking. The sixth word that he read began an increasingly offensive litany of anti-Black racial slurs, to which Pryor responded with anti-White racial slurs that paled in comparison. The exchange culminated with Pryor’s response to Chase reading the word *nigger*. Having no verbal anti-White slur that could compete with what has been argued to be the most offensive word in the English language (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Croom, 2011; Jeshion, 2013; Kennedy, 2002), Pryor responded with, *dead honkey*. Chase proceeded by attempting to calm the visibly enraged Pryor by hiring him at a very high salary and asking Pryor not to hurt him. And the audience laughed (*NBC’s Saturday Night; Mooney & Brooks, 1975*).

More recently, Louis CK performed a stand-up comedy routine in which he discussed

---

Donald A. Saucier and Conor J. O’Dea, Department of Psychological Sciences, Kansas State University; Megan L. Strain, Department of Psychology, University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Donald A. Saucier, Department of Psychological Sciences, Kansas State University, 468 Bluemont Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506. E-mail: [saucier@ksu.edu](mailto:saucier@ksu.edu)

the benefits of being a White man (*Chewed Up*; Székely, 2008). While discussing the historical advantages of being White, Louis CK clarified that he was not saying that Whites are better but that “being White is clearly better, who could even argue?” In further describing the advantages of being White, he stated that as a White man, “you can’t even hurt my feelings” with anti-White slurs like *cracker* just serving to remind him of a time when he could have owned land and people. He ended the bit with a statement that White people will “pay hard” when they no longer occupy the top of the power hierarchy, but until then, “Wheeeee!!!” And the audience laughed.

In each of these examples of humor, the comedians used stereotypes, racial slurs, and references to prejudice and discrimination for comedic purposes. We intend to discuss the purposes of humor like this and what social consequences it may bring. We see three important possibilities. First, it may be that racial humor is antisocially intended and produces antisocial effects (i.e., bad). Second, it may be that racial humor is prosocially intended and produces prosocial effects (i.e., good). Third, it may be that racial humor is prosocially intended but is perceived as antisocially intended and consequently produces antisocial effects (i.e., misunderstood). Given the prevalence of racial humor in American entertainment, much research has been conducted to examine the manifestation and effects of racial humor in American society. Here we review that literature as we discuss the potential for racial humor to be bad, good, or misunderstood.

### **The Bad: Antisocial Effects of Racial Humor**

In the *Saturday Night Live* and Louis CK comedy routines, it may be that the comedians were motivated by prejudice, were expressing prejudice, and were advocating positions of group superiority/inferiority. Perhaps the racial slurs used to target both Whites and Blacks in the *Saturday Night Live* skit were being presented as viable choices of language to describe individuals of these races (i.e., serving the descriptive functions of racial slurs; Blakemore, 2015; Croom, 2011, 2014; Jeshion, 2013; O’Dea & Saucier, in press). Alternatively, by highlighting Pryor’s anger at being targeted by

the slurs, and Chase’s resulting fear, it may have been the intent to demonstrate and perpetuate stereotypes of Blacks as hypersensitive and dangerous. Maybe Louis CK, despite his disclaimer, really was advocating that Whites are better than individuals of other races and, as such, should strive to maintain their position atop the social hierarchy. Were any of these motivations true, then the racial humor would be antisocially intended and would likely produce antisocial effects by reinforcing the status hierarchy.

When humor is used to attack groups, the humor acts as a sword (Rappoport, 2005), wielded by the joke teller to belittle, marginalize, and stigmatize the individuals belonging to the groups targeted by the humor. This is arguably the most obvious perceived intention of racial humor, which by definition makes blatant use of racial stereotypes and/or slurs. Racial humor has been argued to be a *divisive* social mechanism that reinforces and perpetuates negative stereotypes (Berger, 1987; Maio, Olson, & Bush, 1997), and enjoyment of such humor has been used as a measure of prejudice toward outgroups (Crandall, Eshleman, & O’Brien, 2002; Monteith, 1993). In their study, Maio and colleagues (1997, p. 1992) examined Canadian students’ perceptions of Newfoundlanders, following their recitation of humor that was either derogatory (humor that targeted Newfoundlanders as being stupid; e.g., “Fortunately, after a long period of illiteracy, Newfoundlanders are finally trying to get their B.A.s. They’ve finally mastered the first two letters of the alphabet—and backwards at that.”) or nonderogatory (e.g., “Only a 7-year-old kid can actually taste the difference between different colors of M & Ms. For example, I thought the red was heartier, more of a main course M & M. And the light brown was a mellower, kind of after-dinner, M & M.”). They found that participants rated Newfoundlanders significantly less positively (i.e., more negatively stereotypic) in the derogatory humor condition than the nonderogatory condition. Therefore, disparagement humor may not only target outgroups but also impact subsequent evaluations of those groups’ members by individuals who are exposed to the joke.

It is unsurprising that racial humor is often used in this way, with the intention to put down or disparage individuals belonging to the targeted social groups (Billig, 2001; Ferguson &

Ford, 2008; Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Hobden & Olson, 1994; Murray, 1934; Wicker, Barron, & Willis, 1980). Research on disparagement humor has focused on a wide range of targeted social groups. These forms of humor target groups based on, but not limited to, their race (Apte, 1987; Billig, 2001; Maio et al., 1997; Weaver, 2010), religion (Ford, Woodzicka, Triplett, Kochersberger, & Holden, 2014; Wolff, Smith, & Murray, 1934), sex (Ford, 2000; Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008; Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001; Gray & Ford, 2013; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Kochersberger, Ford, Woodzicka, Romero-Sanchez, & Carretero-Dios, 2014; Romero-Sanchez, Duran, Carretero-Dios, Megias, & Moya, 2010; Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998; Thomae & Viki, 2013; Thomas & Esses, 2004), appearance (Burmeister & Carels, 2014), and political affiliation (Braun & Preiser, 2013). Broadly, the effects of disparagement humor include devaluation of outgroups, often loosening norms that discourage expressions of prejudice (e.g., prejudiced norm theory; Ford et al., 2008; Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Ford et al., 2001), and possibly producing negative attitude change toward the targeted social group (Hobden & Olson, 1994).

Much of the extant literature (e.g., Ford, 2000) examining the manifestation of prejudiced norm theory examines the effects of sexist humor on sex-based prejudice and evaluations of women who have been raped. This research has consistently shown links between exposure and reactions to sexist humor (e.g., “A man and woman were stranded in an elevator and they knew they were going to die. The woman turns to the man and says, ‘make me feel like a woman before I die.’ So he takes off his clothes and says, ‘Fold them!’”; Ford, 2000, p. 1096) and sexism (Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2008; Ford et al., 2001; Gray & Ford, 2013; Kochersberger et al., 2014; Romero-Sanchez et al., 2010; Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998; Thomae & Viki, 2013; Thomas & Esses, 2004). Generally, this research has shown that men who reported higher levels of hostile sexism and rape proclivity, and lower levels of identification with women, generally reported more enjoyment of sexist humor and greater likelihood of repeating sexist jokes. Additional research on prejudiced norm theory has examined the effects of racial humor on strengthening negative beliefs about various ethnic minority groups and allowing for more-

negative expressions of prejudice (Ford, 1997; Maio et al., 1997; Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001). It appears that disparagement humor allows for increased expressions of prejudice toward targeted groups by loosening the social norms that normally inhibit prejudice.

Overt expressions of prejudice have decreased in recent decades (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981; Murrell, Dietz-Uhler, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Drout, 1994; Nail, Harton, & Decker, 2003; Sydell & Nelson, 2000). This is presumed to be primarily due to societal pressure to appear nonprejudiced toward outgroup members (Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002; Plant & Devine, 1998). However, subtle expressions of prejudice toward outgroup members persist, particularly when the prejudice emerges in situations in which the behavior is not blatantly prejudiced (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). The justification-suppression model of prejudice (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) offers a comprehensive model that explains when expressions of prejudice will be justified or suppressed. This model generally states that various internal and external factors function to justify (i.e., increase) and suppress (i.e., decrease) individuals’ expressions of their genuine prejudices.

Due to the norm-loosening effects of humor, as outlined in prejudiced norm theory (Ford & Ferguson, 2004), group-based humor may function to justify the expression of prejudice as explained by the justification-suppression model (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). Humor allows individuals to “feel out” their audience. If they make a sexist, racist, or otherwise derogatory comment toward a group and the audience reacts in a negative way, the perpetrators of the joke simply have to say “I was just kidding” to cover the behavior and appear more appropriate. Thus, the perpetrators of the joke can avoid experiencing negative reactions to their prejudiced expression (e.g., Plant & Devine, 1998).

Further, it may be that individual differences in how people use humor would make some people more likely than others to use jokes as a cover for prejudice. Unsurprisingly, individuals with higher levels of prejudice may seek venues in which to express their prejudice justifiably (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). But those with

more-cavalier racial humor beliefs (i.e., perceive racial humor to be nothing more than a harmless joke) may be particularly prone to using jokes that have the capacity to offend. These individuals may be more dismissive of the potential negative effects of prejudicially intended racial humor and may then contribute to reinforcing the status hierarchy through the perpetuation of prejudice that they perceive as acceptable (Hodson, Rush, & MacInnis, 2010). Similarly, it may be that those with more-aggressive humor styles, who enhance themselves by ridiculing others, find disparagement humor to be a convenient mechanism to maintain superiority over others (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003).

As described earlier, the case stating that racial humor is unavoidably antisocial is compelling. It has been argued that racial humor does not even qualify as humor, because the jokes cannot be funny and have no positive functions (Billig, 2001). Although we agree that racial humor may be used to disparage target groups and to reinforce existing inequities in the status hierarchy, we argue that these are not the intentions behind all examples of racial humor. We therefore consider the potential for racial humor to be prosocial.

### The Good: Prosocial Effects of Racial Humor

It is possible that the intentions of the *Saturday Night Live* skit and Louis CK's stand-up comedy routine were prosocial. Rather than intending to reinforce the status hierarchy in which Whites are politically, economically, and socially dominant, perhaps the comedians were attempting to subvert it. Perhaps Chase was parodying White bigots, demonstrating how ridiculously inappropriate it would be to use anti-Black racial slurs in social interactions. Pryor's enraged response may have been a cue to the audience that they should empathize with those who are targeted by racism and that they should join in the opposition to such blatant expressions of intolerance. Louis CK may have been highlighting the realities of White privilege to raise social awareness in Whites about their superior (and undeserved) position in society and asking them to be more active in making American society a more egalitarian place for people of all races. Were these their intentions,

then such usage of racial humor, despite its stereotypes and racial slurs, may be expected and intended to produce prosocial effects.

When racial humor is used for prosocial purposes, the humor acts as a shield (Rappoport, 2005) and may be wielded by the joke teller to create bonds among people and to challenge and defend against prejudice. Research has shown that racial humor, and even racial slurs, have been adopted by the targeted group members and used to affiliate and bond within the group (Bianchi, 2014; Galinsky et al., 2013; Guerin, 2003; Rahman, 2012). In reappropriating racial humor and racial slurs that had previously been used to target them, groups may disempower the humor and slurs. The groups may then use them among themselves as a form of inoculation against the experience of prejudice, reducing their subsequent social sting such that other experiences of prejudice produce less-negative affective and behavioral responses (Rappoport, 2005). Consistent with this reasoning, research has shown that when minority group members reappropriate derogatory slurs and racial humor for use among themselves, they report less-negative perceptions of the slurs as a result (Galinsky et al., 2013). Empirically examining the concept of reappropriation, Galinsky and colleagues (2013) found, across 10 studies, that reappropriation leads individuals to feel empowered, groups to be empowered, and others to perceive the groups (and consequently their members) as being more in control of the stigmatizing labels. These findings are thought provoking and showcase the importance of context for the use of racial humor and slurs. So whereas this latter research indicated that the use of racial slurs among minority group members may have benefits (Galinsky et al., 2013), other research has shown that the use of racial slurs by majority group members to target minority group members may negatively impact how the minority group members are evaluated (Goodman, Schell, Alexander, & Eidelman, 2008; Kirkland, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1987).

More-recent studies have begun to further examine how social context affects how the use of racial humor and slurs are perceived. For example, O'Dea and Saucier (2015) have shown that traditionally Black racial slurs used toward Whites are perceived as significantly less offensive than are White racial slurs and

nonracial insults. These results suggest that Whites may perceive Blacks' use of Black racial slurs to target them to be a sign of respect, essentially granting them honorary membership into their social group. Additional research on racial slurs has suggested that slurs are also perceived by majority group members to be less offensive when used in situations where their use may be perceived as affiliative (O'Dea et al., 2015). Specifically, O'Dea et al. (2015) showed that racial slurs used between friends are perceived as less offensive than are racial slurs used between strangers and that different racial slurs are perceived with differing levels of offensive intensity. Taken together, research on the reappropriation of racial slurs and racial humor has suggested that, in certain situations, individuals may use racial slurs and racial humor to enhance group affiliation and to increase their resistance to derogatory ethnic humor.

Racial humor may also be used by racial minorities to cope with adversity and stigma (Boskin & Dorinson, 1985; Hart, 2007; Juni & Katz, 2001; Nezelek & Derks, 2001). Research on racial humor as a coping mechanism has shown that minority group members often use self-deprecating humor as a way to empower themselves, in contradiction to majority group challenges to their self-worth (Boskin & Dorinson, 1985; Hart, 2007; Juni & Katz, 2001; Nezelek & Derks, 2001).

Rappoport (2005) noted that racial humor was created by members of minority groups to target themselves and to serve prosocial functions. It has even been associated with greater psychological well-being. Davies (1991) similarly argued that racial humor is rarely, if ever, formed on the basis of conflict or hostility. Rather, the humor consists of jokes told in situations in which joke tellers' intents are ambiguous. And because the purpose of humor is often to be incongruous and absurd to increase positive feelings, it is not necessarily appropriate to assume that joke tellers' true attitudes are conveyed by their jokes (Davies, 1990). Further, the taboo nature of racial humor, and its deviation from the norms of polite conversation and other social rules, may make racial humor a particularly powerful vehicle for levity, rather than being a serious attack on social groups (Davies, 2002).

Rappoport (2005) discussed several other prosocial functions that racial humor may

achieve. For example, racial humor may allow minority groups to safely discuss their experiences of prejudice. Minority groups may also use racial humor to challenge the majority group's position atop the social hierarchy without fear of social retaliation. Other functions may include raising the topics of prejudice and discrimination for discussion in less-controversial and less-threatening ways, thus increasing the awareness of these topics for discussion and making them more palatable to consider, particularly for majority group members whose privilege may be questioned. Finally, racial humor may provide an educational or corrective function through which social lessons for appropriate social behavior, including how to respond to being discriminated against, may be taught.

As a popular culture example of these functions, consider the comedy sketch show *Key & Peele*, which recently ended its five-season run on Comedy Central. It used racial humor in a positive manner in every episode, most frequently by providing commentary on issues related to race and stereotypes. For example, in a recurring portrayal of "Luther," President Obama's anger translator, Luther's purpose was to "translate" the president's cool-tempered responses to issues by reframing them into the hot-tempered responses that the president could not be seen making (*Key & Peele*; Conroy et al., 2012). Although much of the humor was derived from its delivery, much of the humor also stemmed from the statement about the risk President Obama faced as the first Black president if he were to fulfill the stereotype of an "angry Black man." In another skit, titled "Suburban Zombies," White zombies cautiously avoid eating the Black characters in the skit, even guiding their zombie children away from the Black living people (*Key & Peele*; Drysdale et al., 2012). And as Tannenbaum (2015) pointed out, the White zombies even make it a point to lock their vehicles when Black living people pass by. These behaviors are examples of the modern racism that Black people face every day, but expressing the issue in the context of a zombie apocalypse, using humor, brings up the issue in a way that is unlikely to receive pushback. Both of these skits draw attention to racial issues in a manner that allows for relief (i.e., a shield) from anti-Black prejudice but in a way that is relatively noncontroversial and nonthreatening.

Similarly, subversive forms of racial humor may be used in social interactions to confront prejudiced individuals. The way in which this humor disparages individuals who express prejudice is less confrontational than simply disparaging them as perpetrators of the prejudice. Research has shown that when individuals are confronted for expressing prejudice, they consequently reduce their future expressions of prejudice (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006). However, in doing so, the perpetrators of prejudice often resent the individual who confronted them for their expression of prejudice (Czopp et al., 2006). An alternative to traditional confrontational methods may be via subversive humor. Research has shown that subversive humor may combat prejudice in a less-confrontational manner by placing a humorous context around the confrontation (Boskin & Dorinson, 1985; Kramer, 2013). One would expect that, consistent with this research on confrontation, individuals who are confronted may reduce future expressions of prejudice (Saucier, Strain, Till, & O'Dea, 2015). However, because this confrontation came in the form of a humorous message, perpetrators of the prejudice may be less likely to perceive the individual who used the subversive humor negatively. Thus, subversive humor may be used to confront perpetrators of prejudice with less likelihood of backlash.

In sum, although a case may be made that racial humor is antisocial in intention and effects, a counterargument can be made that racial humor may also be prosocial in intention and effects. Rather than disparaging minority groups and reinforcing an inequitable status hierarchy, racial humor may provide a defense against prejudice and subvert that status hierarchy. However, the sophisticated manner in which the subversion is implemented may introduce a degree of risk, requiring that the audience perceive and understand the subversive intention. If this element of the racial humor is missed, even prosocially intended racial humor may have ironic antisocial effects.

### The Misunderstood: When Subversion Fails

It may be the case that even good intentions are not enough to salvage the ramifications of misunderstood racial humor. Although prosocial motivations may have inspired the *Saturday*

*Night Live* skit and the Louis CK comedy routine, the elements of satire, sarcasm, and parody on which these prosocial motivations would have relied may have been lost on an audience not able or willing to perceive them. Chase's parody of the White bigot may have instead been perceived as a model for interracial interactions. Pryor's indignation may have instead been perceived as a racial predisposition for violence. Louis CK's message about the social dangers of White privilege may have instead been perceived as a cautionary message to Whites about the need to maintain their status atop the social hierarchy. In these cases, the true but unrecognized subversive intentions would have been meaningless, and the message and social effects of the humor would have been tragically ironic.

Racial humor, by definition, makes use of racial stereotypes and/or racial slurs in conveying a social message. Superficially, the humor may appear to advocate for the truth of those racial stereotypes and for the appropriateness of using those racial slurs. It may take effort on the part of the audience to understand the deeper, subversive message, which is that these stereotypes and the use of these racial slurs are ridiculous. And given that racial humor is delivered as levity and may produce a nonserious mindset (e.g., Ford & Ferguson, 2004), the deeper subversive message may be missed.

Research examining reactions to the political comedy show *The Colbert Report* illustrates the potential for the audience to radically misinterpret the intended message that subversive humor attempts to convey (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). Colbert portrayed an outlandishly extreme right-wing news anchor to mock the journalist messages and style of individuals like Bill O'Reilly and to challenge and subvert the policies and arguments made by those on the far right of the American political spectrum. In short, Colbert made fun of conservatives and their policies with the (likely) intention of reducing support for these individuals and their policies. The evidence, however, suggests that the opposite effect occurs. Viewers exposed to *The Colbert Report* are often not led to be more critical of conservatives and their policies but instead report increased affinity for conservatives and their policies. It appears that the satire, the subversion, and the irony are missed, and

the audience takes the message at its superficial face value (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008).

Preliminary work examining racial humor has suggested similar dangers in attempting to subvert prejudice. As Rappoport (2005) argued, racial humor may be used to challenge, rather than reinforce, expressions of prejudice. Accordingly, Saucier, Strain, Till, and O'Dea (2015) examined the potential for subversive racial humor to convey that expressions of prejudice are inappropriate and to consequently inhibit expressions of prejudice. An experimenter told each participant in the subversive racial humor condition, individually, a riddle that began with the question, "What do you call a Black guy who flies a plane?" After giving participants a moment to consider their response, the experimenter delivered the punchline "A pilot, you fucking racist!" This joke was chosen because it begins by inspiring stereotypical thinking in the audience and then confronts the audience with the inappropriateness of their stereotypical thinking. Unfortunately, the results showed that many of the participants misunderstood the joke as intending to disparage Blacks rather than intending to challenge and punish expressions of racism. A second study showed that even when given explicit instructions to think about the joke for a minute before reporting its target, many of the participants did not understand the joke's subversive intent (Saucier, Strain, Till, & O'Dea, 2015). Together, these results show that even humor intended to be prosocial may be misunderstood, and when the audience misses the subversion, the effects may be ironically antisocial. Thus, the inequitable status hierarchy may be unintentionally reinforced rather than subverted.

It may be that individual differences moderate perceptions of racial humor's capacity to be subversive. Perhaps those with higher levels of racism are less likely to perceive, or less motivated to perceive, the true intent of subversive racial humor. Similarly, those with higher levels of cavalier humor beliefs or those with aggressive humor styles may be less likely to see subversive racial humor as subversive. Conversely, those with greater tendencies to be aware of prejudice in society (Miller & Saucier, 2015) may be more sensitive to perceiving subversive messages in racial humor. Further, individual differences in the need for cognition and cognitive capacity,

as well as state differences in cognitive load and attention, may be factors that influence the interpretation of subversive racial humor. Research has so far failed to examine these possibilities, and we believe this is a promising area for future research.

### Practical Implications

Racial humor is an interpretive medium and, as such, allows the audience to glean any of a variety of antisocial or prosocial messages from it. These messages may or may not coincide with the intentions of the individuals delivering the racial humor. Therefore, racial humor may be used with antisocial or prosocial intentions, but even racial humor used with prosocial intentions may produce unintended antisocial effects. This is especially dangerous given that racial humor employs racial stereotypes and/or racial slurs, which may, at face value, appear to be promoting the appropriateness of expressions of prejudice. The levity and nonserious nature of the situation in which racial humor occurs, and to which it further contributes, may make the understanding of a deeper, subversive message that condemns expressions of prejudice less likely.

Despite this danger, we are not willing to universally endorse a position that individuals should completely avoid racial humor. Rather, we argue that individuals should be aware of the capacity for racial humor to function as both sword and shield in the continuing struggle against prejudice in society. With this awareness, we argue that individuals should be careful when they couch their subversive messages in satire. We argue that, rather than trusting the audience to exert the attention and cognitive effort needed to uncover the message that challenges and confronts expressions of prejudice, joke tellers should either foreshadow their subversive intentions to their audience or engage in a brief debriefing session after the joke. Although this may make the racial humor less of an inside joke that only a select few in the audience would understand, it may increase the likelihood that the joke will successfully subvert, rather than sadly reinforce, the social hierarchy.

Audiences can be educated about the potential for racial humor to serve as both sword and shield (Saucier, Strain, & Veenendaal, 2015). Having these conversations about the potential of racial humor to be antisocial or prosocial, as well as the potential for it to be misinterpreted,

increases the likelihood that individuals will process humor without immediately dismissing it as inappropriate or, alternatively, “laughing it off” as harmless. That said, although courses on racial humor do exist, they are unlikely to become commonplace on college campuses. However, educators may contribute to students’ understanding of such humor by incorporating disparaging humor into other content areas and using it as a tool to discuss more-complex issues. Further, although it is unlikely that everyone in the general population will have the opportunity to take a course analyzing this racial humor, initiating audiences’ deeper processing of racial humor may increase the likelihood that they grasp its deeper subversive meaning. More research is needed to investigate the ways in which this could occur, but the increasing popularity of shows like *Key & Peele* and satirical news programming (e.g., *The Daily Show*, *The Nightly Show*) may provide an alternative method (i.e., outside a classroom) of getting audiences to think about the issues that such shows address. We believe the key to understanding subversive humor may simply be to make the “nonserious” mindset generally evoked by humorous situations just a bit more serious. This combination of humor and critical thought may provide the foundation on which subversive humor safely lands.

Of course, nothing can guarantee that audiences will accurately discern the message of prosocially intended racial humor to be a shield rather than a sword. But having knowledge of the multiple possible meanings of racial humor may increase the extent to which the audience carefully processes and thinks about racial humor. Given the prevalence of racial humor in American society, there is likely benefit in increasing social awareness about the possibilities of racial humor to be bad, good, or misunderstood. And as joke tellers educate their audiences, racial humor may actualize its potential for promoting thinking and discussion about social change and, in doing so, threaten the sustainability of a hierarchical society. Laughter then may become a battle cry for the condemnation of prejudice.

## References

- Anderson, L., & Lepore, E. (2013). Slurring words. *Noûs*, 47, 25–48. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0068.2010.00820.x>
- Apte, M. L. (1987). Ethnic humor versus “sense of humor.” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 30, 27–41. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/000276487030003004>
- Baumgartner, J. C., & Morris, J. S. (2008). One “nation,” under Stephen? The effects of The Colbert Report on American youth. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 52, 622–643. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08838150802437487>
- Berger, A. A. (1987). Humor: An introduction. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 30, 6–15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/000276487030003002>
- Bianchi, C. (2014). Slurs and appropriation: An echoic account. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 66, 35–44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2014.02.009>
- Billig, M. (2001). Humour and hatred: The racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan. *Discourse & Society*, 12, 267–289. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0957926501012003001>
- Blakemore, D. (2015). Slurs and expletives: A case against a general account of expressive meaning. *Language Sciences*, 52, 22–35.
- Boskin, J., & Dorinson, J. (1985). Ethnic humor: Subversion and survival. *American Quarterly*, 37, 81–97. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2712764>
- Braun, A., & Preiser, S. (2013). The impact of disparaging humor content on the funniness of political jokes. *Humor*, 26, 249–275. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/humor-2013-0016>
- Burmeister, J. M., & Carels, R. A. (2014). Weight-related humor in the media: Appreciation, distaste and anti-fat attitudes. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 3, 223–238. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000029>
- Conroy, S., Drysdale, R., Dunn, C., Key, K., Jackson, P. A., Martel, J., . . . Atencio, P. (Directors). (2012). Series premier [Television episode]. In K. Key, J. Peele, I. Roberts, & J. Martel (Executive producers), *Key & Peele*. New York, NY: Comedy Central.
- Crandall, C. S., & Eshleman, A. (2003). A justification-suppression model of the expression and experience of prejudice. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, 414–446.
- Crandall, C. S., Eshleman, A., & O’Brien, L. (2002). Social norms and the expression and suppression of prejudice: The struggle for internalization. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 359–378. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.3.359>
- Croom, A. M. (2011). Slurs. *Language Sciences*, 33, 343–358. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2010.11.005>
- Croom, A. M. (2014). The semantics of slurs: A refutation of pure expressivism. *Language Sciences*, 41, 227–242. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2013.07.003>
- Czopp, A. M., Monteith, M. J., & Mark, A. Y. (2006). Standing up for a change: Reducing bias



- through interpersonal confrontation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90, 784–803.
- Davies, C. (1990). An explanation of Jewish jokes about Jewish women. *Humor*, 3, 363–378. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/humr.1990.3.4.363>
- Davies, C. (1991). Ethnic humor, hostility, and aggression: A reply to Elliott Oring. *Humor*, 4, 415–422. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/humr.1991.4.3-4.415>
- Davies, C. (2002). *The mirth of nations*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Devine, P. G., Plant, E. A., Amodio, D. M., Harmon-Jones, E., & Vance, S. L. (2002). The regulation of explicit and implicit race bias: The role of motivations to respond without prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 835–848. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.5.835>
- Dovidio, J. F., & Gaertner, S. L. (2000). Aversive racism and selection decisions: 1989 and 1999. *Psychological Science*, 11, 315–319. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.00262>
- Dovidio, J. F., Gaertner, S. L., Kawakami, K., & Hodson, G. (2002). Why can't we just get along? Interpersonal biases and interracial distrust. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 8, 88–102. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.8.2.88>
- Drysdale, R., Dunn, C., Key, K., Jackson, P. A., Martel, J., Peele, J., . . . (Writers), Atencio, P. (Director). (2012). Michael Jackson halloween [Television episode]. In K. Key, J. Peele, I. Roberts, & J. Martel (Executive producers), *Key & Peele*. New York, NY: Comedy Central.
- Ferguson, M. A., & Ford, T. E. (2008). Disparagement humor: A theoretical and empirical review of psychoanalytic superiority, and social identity theories. *Humor*, 21, 283–312. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/HUMOR.2008.014>
- Ford, T. E. (1997). Effects of stereotypical television portrayals of African-Americans on person perception. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 60, 266–278. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2787086>
- Ford, T. E. (2000). Effects of sexist humor on tolerance of sexist events. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26, 1094–1107. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/01461672002611006>
- Ford, T. E., Boxer, C. F., Armstrong, J., & Edel, J. R. (2008). More than “just a joke”: The prejudice-releasing function of sexist humor. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34, 159–170. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167207310022>
- Ford, T. E., & Ferguson, M. A. (2004). Social consequences of disparagement humor: A prejudiced norm theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8, 79–94. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0801\\_4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0801_4)
- Ford, T. E., Wentzel, E. R., & Lorion, J. (2001). Effects of exposure to sexist humor on perceptions of normative tolerance of sexism. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31, 677–691. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.56>
- Ford, T. E., Woodzicka, J. A., Triplett, S. R., Kochersberger, A. O., & Holden, C. J. (2014). Not all groups are equal: Differential vulnerability of social groups to the prejudice-releasing effects of disparagement humor. *Group Processes & Inter-group Relations*, 17, 178–199.
- Galinsky, A. D., Wang, C. S., Whitson, J. A., Anicich, E. M., Hugenberg, K., & Bodenhausen, G. V. (2013). The reappropriation of stigmatizing labels: The reciprocal relationship between power and self-labeling. *Psychological Science*, 24, 2020–2029.
- Goodman, J. A., Schell, J., Alexander, M. G., & Eidelman, S. (2008). The impact of a derogatory remark on prejudice toward a gay male leader. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 38, 542–555. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2008.00316.x>
- Gray, J. A., & Ford, T. E. (2013). The role of social context in the interpretation of sexist humor. *Humor*, 26, 277–293. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/humor-2013-0017>
- Greenwood, D., & Isbell, L. M. (2002). Ambivalent sexism and the dumb blonde: Men's and women's reactions to sexist jokes. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26, 341–350. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1471-6402.t01-2-00073>
- Guerin, B. (2003). Combating prejudice and racism: New interventions from a functional analysis of racist language. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 13, 29–45. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/casp.699>
- Hart, M. T. (2007). Humour and social protest: An introduction. *International Review of Social History*, 52(S15), 1–20.
- Hobden, K. L., & Olson, J. M. (1994). From jest to antipathy: Disparagement humor as a source of dissonance-motivated attitude change. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 15, 239–249. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15324834bas1503\\_2](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15324834bas1503_2)
- Hodson, G., Rush, J., & Macinnis, C. C. (2010). A joke is just a joke (except when it isn't): Cavalier humor beliefs facilitate the expression of group dominance motives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99, 660–682. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0019627>
- Jeshion, R. (2013). Slurs and stereotypes. *Analytic Philosophy*, 54, 314–329. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/phib.12021>
- Juni, S., & Katz, B. (2001). Self-effacing wit as a response to oppression: Dynamics in ethnic humor. *Journal of General Psychology*, 128, 119–142. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00221300109598903>
- Kennedy, R. (2002). *Nigger: The strange career of a troublesome word*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

- Kirkland, S. L., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (1987). Further evidence of the deleterious effects of overheard derogatory ethnic labels. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *13*, 216–227. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167287132007>
- Kochersberger, A. O., Ford, T. E., Woodzicka, J. A., Romero-Sanchez, M., & Carretero-Dios, H. (2014). The role of identification with women as a determinant of amusement with sexist humor. *Humor*, *27*, 441–460. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/humor-2014-0071>
- Kramer, C. A. (2013). An existentialist account of the role of humor against oppression. *Humor*, *26*, 629–651. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/humor-2013-0045>
- Maio, G. R., Olson, J. M., & Bush, J. E. (1997). Telling jokes that disparage social groups: Effects on the joke teller's stereotypes. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *27*, 1986–2000. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1997.tb01636.x>
- Martin, R. A., Puhlik-Doris, P., Larsen, G., Gray, J., & Weir, K. (2003). Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to psychological well-being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *37*, 48–75.
- McConahay, J. B., Hardee, B. B., & Batts, V. (1981). Has racism declined in America? It depends on who is asking and what is asked. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *25*, 563–579.
- Miller, S. S., & Saucier, D. A. (2015). *Individual differences in the propensity to make attributions to prejudice*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Monteith, M. J. (1993). Self-regulation of prejudiced responses: Implications for progress in prejudice-reduction efforts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *65*, 469–485. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.65.3.469>
- Mooney, P. (Writer), & Brooks, A. (Director). (1975). Racist word association interview [Television series episode]. In L. Michaels (Executive producer), *NBC's Saturday Night*. New York, NY: National Broadcasting Company.
- Murray, H. A. (1934). The psychology of humor. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *29*, 66–81. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0074853>
- Murrell, A. J., Dietz-Uhler, B. L., Dovidio, J. F., Gaertner, S. L., & Drout, C. (1994). Aversive racism and resistance to affirmative action: Perceptions of justice are not necessarily color blind. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, *15*, 71–86. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01973533.1994.9646073>
- Nail, P. R., Harton, H. C., & Decker, B. P. (2003). Political orientation and modern versus aversive racism: Tests of Dovidio and Gaertner's (1998) integrated model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *84*, 754–770. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.4.754>
- Nezlek, J. B., & Derks, P. (2001). Use of humor as a coping mechanism, psychological adjustment, and social interaction. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, *14*, 395–413. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/humr.2001.011>
- O'Dea, C. J., Miller, S. S., Andres, E. B., Ray, M. H., Till, D. F., & Saucier, D. A. (2015). Out of bounds: Factors affecting the perceived offensiveness of racial slurs. *Language Sciences*, *52*, 155–164. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2014.09.005>
- O'Dea, C. J., & Saucier, D. A. (2015). *Perceptions of racial slurs used by Blacks toward Whites: Derogation or affiliation?* Manuscript submitted for publication.
- O'Dea, C. J., & Saucier, D. A. (in press). Negative emotions versus target descriptions: Examining perceptions of racial slurs as expressive and descriptive. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*.
- Plant, E. A., & Devine, P. G. (1998). Internal and external motivations to respond without prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *75*, 811–832.
- Rahman, J. (2012). The N word: Its history and use in the African American community. *Journal of English Linguistics*, *40*, 137–171. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0075424211414807>
- Rappoport, L. (2005). *Punchlines: The case for racial, ethnic, and gender humor*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Romero-Sánchez, M., Durán, M., Carretero-Dios, H., Megías, J. L., & Moya, M. (2010). Exposure to sexist humor and rape proclivity: The moderator effect of aversiveness ratings. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *25*, 2339–2350. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0886260509354884>
- Ryan, K. M., & Kanjorski, J. (1998). The enjoyment of sexist humor, rape attitudes, and relationship aggression in college students. *Sex Roles*, *38*, 743–756. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1018868913615>
- Saucier, D. A., Strain, M. L., Till, D. F., & O'Dea, C. J. (2015). "What do you call a Black guy who flies a plane?": Disparagement, confrontation, and failed subversion in the context of racial humor. Manuscript in preparation.
- Saucier, D. A., Strain, M. L., & Veenendaal, A. L. (2015). *Examining ethnic humor in an academic setting using college undergraduates*. Manuscript in preparation.
- Stangor, C., Sechrist, G. B., & Jost, J. T. (2001). Changing racial beliefs by providing consensus information. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *27*, 486–496. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167201274009>
- Sydell, E. J., & Nelson, E. S. (2000). Modern racism on campus: A survey of attitudes and perceptions. *Social Science Journal*, *37*, 627–635. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0362-3319\(00\)00105-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0362-3319(00)00105-1)

- Székely, L. [C. K. Louis] (Writer). (2008). I enjoy being white. On *Chewed up* [CD, DVD]. Boston, MA: Image Entertainment.
- Tannenbaum, M. (2015, September 15). Psychology lessons from *Key & Peele* [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/psysociety/psychology-lessons-from-key-peeel/>
- Thomae, M., & Viki, G. T. (2013). Why did the woman cross the road? The effect of sexist humor on men's rape proclivity. *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*, 7, 250–269. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0099198>
- Thomas, C. A., & Esses, V. M. (2004). Individual differences in reactions to sexist humor. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 7, 89–100. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1368430204039975>
- Weaver, S. (2010). Developing a rhetorical analysis of racist humor: Examining anti-Black jokes on the internet. *Social Semiotics*, 20, 537–555. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2010.513188>
- Wicker, F. W., Barron, W. L., III, & Willis, A. C. (1980). Disparagement humor: Dispositions and resolutions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39, 701–709. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.39.4.701>
- Wolff, H. A., Smith, C. E., & Murray, H. A. (1934). The psychology of humor. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 28, 341–365. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0075400>

Received February 27, 2015

Revision received October 15, 2015

Accepted December 14, 2015 ■